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SUBJECT: CORREA TAKES THE LEAD, COULD WIN IN THE FIRST ROUND

Classified By: PolOff Erik Martini for reasons 1.4 (B&D)

¶1. (C) Summary: Rafael Correa has taken a commanding lead in all recent polls, with 26% to Leon Roldos' 20%, trailed by Cynthia Viteri and Alvaro Noboa each with 11%. Meanwhile undecided remain substantial at 43%. Pollsters say his momentum has been strong, but may be leveling. His rise has been abetted by the poor campaign performance of Roldos and Viteri. Electoral laws prohibit public release of polling data between now and the election, but polls will continue to be taken and privately available and shared within the political class. A Correa first round win has become a theoretical possibility, but remains less likely than a second round win. In a recent debate, Correa signaled that he would be supportive of internal efforts to combat narco-trafficking and illegal armed group activity. He continues to oppose international arbitration in the Oxy case and firmly stands against renewal of the Manta FOL agreement.

In a recent interview, Correa made disparaging remarks about President Bush, but said he would deal with him with the respect his position (rather than his personal qualities) merits. End Summary.

Latest Polling Puts Correa Firmly in the Lead

¶2. (U) From now on, Ecuadorian election law prohibits

publication of polls in the media. The last polls published in the media on September 24 now put Rafael Correa well ahead of former front runner Leon Roldos, who continues his momentum downward. Cynthia Viteri and Alvaro Noboa are in a fight for a distant third and fourth place. Undecided voters have also fallen, ranging from 31 to 47% in four recent polls. Current poll results, all within +/- 3% margin of error (Cedatos, "Informe Confidencial," and Market):

-- Rafael Correa (26%, 22%, 26.4%)
-- Leon Roldos (18%, 20%, 19.5%)
-- Cynthia Viteri (10%, 9%, 11.4%)
-- Alvaro Noboa (11%, 9%, 10.1%)

¶3. (C) Informe Confidencial, one of the most respected polling firms, passed additional polling information to Ambassador, DCM and PolChief in a meeting on September 26 showing Correa with 26%, Roldos with 20%, and Viteri and Noboa each with 11%. Undecideds remain at 43%. Apart from the data in paragraph 2, all other polling information in this cable refers to this latest unpublished information passed during the meeting.

Correa Wins With 40%?

¶4. (U) Ecuadorian election law stipulates that a candidate may win outright in the first round if he or she gains one vote more than 50% of the valid votes. A candidate may also win in the first round if the ticket gains at least 40% of the valid votes (subtracting any blank and null votes) and beats the next highest challenger by 10% -- a difficult but achievable outcome for Correa should current trends continue.

Valid votes are defined as those that express in whatever intelligible manner the will of the voter on the official ballot. Null votes are defined as those that are marked for more than one candidate or have any other signal demonstrating the voter's will to nullify his or her vote. Blank votes have no mark.

Debate: Correa Dazzles; Viteri Attacks; Roldos Floats

¶5. (C) The Quito Chamber of Commerce on September 25 hosted a presidential debate for candidates that had at least 5% support in the September 2-3 Market poll. Leon Roldos, Rafael Correa, and Cynthia Viteri participated; Alvaro Noboa declined. In opening comments, Roldos stressed the need for more measured political reforms and again proposed a popular referendum as a starting point, and said he would encourage economic development. Taking the mike with a confident smirk, Correa first acknowledged Ecuadorian immigrants living abroad and vowed to change the "nefarious" system that "expelled" them from their lands, and greeted indigenous viewers in Quechua. He then dismissed Roldos' proposal, calling for an immediate and radical overhaul of the current political, social, and economic systems. Viteri, clearly poised for battle with Correa, rebuffed his comments, calling instead for political stability, judicial security, and a positive investment climate. She also vowed to invest in education, healthcare, and to encourage entrepreneurship.

¶6. (C) Throughout the debate Viteri aggressively attacked Correa, and laid sole claim to the center-right spectrum on issues like the FTA. Correa displayed his dazzling verbal gifts with the same forceful, anti-establishment message that has won him the lead, painting his opponents as compromised figures of the "partidocracia." Roldos, utterly lacking the charisma of the other two, sought to stay above the fray and play the responsible, patriotic statesman. Correa successfully responded to Viteri's attacks, and none seemed likely to put him on the defensive.

Correa Criticizes U.S. But Open to Drug Fight

¶7. (U) Responding to a question on narcotics trafficking and money laundering in Ecuador, Correa expressed the need to increase efforts to combat this international threat, but called it principally a U.S. problem. "Drugs kill more young people in the U.S. and 50% of incarcerated Americans are there for drug related crimes," he said. He noted Ecuador's efforts to counter narcotics trafficking as "significant" given that "we are not a producing nation like Colombia and Peru," and criticized the U.S. for considering ATPDEA suspension. Correa said that Ecuador should continue to receive trade preferences as compensation for its counter-narcotics efforts. On the Manta FOL, however, Correa again firmly stated that he would not renew, adding a new laughline "unless the U.S. allowed an Ecuadorian base in Miami."

Correa Echoes Chavez's Devil Remarks

¶8. (U) In an interview with TV personality Carlos Vera on September 27, Correa called President George Bush "limited and clumsy" and said that he had damaged the United States and the world. He also apparently concurred with Hugo Chavez's recent derogatory "devil" remarks offline. Correa

was quick, however, to distinguish as personal opinion only his disdain for President Bush from his positive view of the American people, noting that he lived in the U.S. for four years. He said that if elected president he would honor protocol and work with President Bush as the U.S. head of state.

¶9. (U) Correa also denied reports that he would reduce military funding by 50%, adding that he would reprioritize the military's objectives to better address non-conventional threats. He signaled his desire to defend the country against narco-traffickers and illegal armed groups, while refusing to involve Ecuador in Plan Colombia. Turning to economic issues, Correa said he considers the Oxy case closed and that he does not support international arbitration. He promised that his proposed review of current national debt servicing would not negatively impact Ecuador's investment climate.

Comment

¶10. (C) Correa could conceivably win in the first round. Polling experts believe he is more likely to win the second. Current polls show Correa leading Roldos in a second round matchup by 44 to 39%. A third, currently less likely scenario is a Roldos comeback in the second round. But as the late leader, Correa could be effectively attacked as the front-runner. His support is not consolidated, and his supporters actually disagree with his positions on FTA, Manta, and other issues almost as often as they agree with him, according to sophisticated pollsters. His negative ratings are 40%, compared to just 30% for Roldos. Finally, undecided Ecuadorian voters tend not to vote for the front-runner, more often seeking to punish success and level the playing field by boosting the underdog.

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